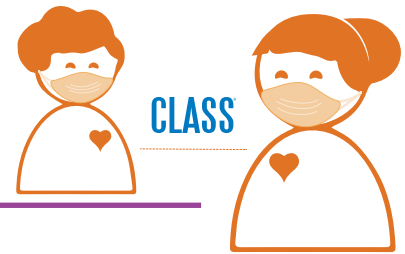


EFFECTIVE INTERACTIONS

in Socially Distanced Classrooms during COVID-19, Pre-K–K-3



The spread of COVID-19 has led many schools and programs to put social distancing practices in place for the start of the 2020–2021 school year. The adoption of masks, physical distancing, and other precautions has led teachers to ask how they can maintain effective interactions with the children in their classrooms. This document uses the lens of the CLASS® tool to describe some of the effective ways to interact with children in this environment. What’s most important to remember is that interactions matter—they still matter and maybe matter even more than ever. As an educator, you may be looking for new ways to connect with your learners, manage their time, and provide them with cognitive challenges, but children’s need for these kinds of interactions remains. The skills you have already built around connecting with, supporting, and stimulating children will continue to serve you as you head into the classroom this fall.

Positive Climate

Facial expressions and physical presence are a large part of how people are used to connecting with each other. With social distancing and the use of masks in classrooms, think about new ways you might build these important connections and establish relationships. Children who may have recently experienced trauma or heightened stress will need to feel this warmth from you.

- Give your time and attention to children, moving around the room and checking in frequently.
- Show a genuine interest in what children are doing.
- Ask children about their lives outside of the classroom.
- Participate in shared activities, even if you’re maintaining some physical distance. For instance, read a book aloud or put on a puppet show.
- Give children thumbs-ups, air fives, fist pumps, elbow bumps, claps, and other celebratory gestures.
- Give children air hugs, air hearts, finger hearts, “I love you” signs, and other affectionate gestures.
- If you’re using masks, think of creative ways to show children how you’re feeling. For instance, you might print a picture of yourself smiling to show children when you are feeling happy.
- Face children and get on their level when they’re speaking, even if you’re maintaining some physical distance.

Teacher Sensitivity

Depending on their experiences during the pandemic, children in your classroom could display anxiety, stress, or depression. Despite the health and safety protocols you are working within, it is still important to watch children’s body language and behavior so that you can catch subtle signs that they are having difficulty. Children need your attention and support to feel a sense of safety.

- Look for body language that indicates a lack of engagement, such as slouching or downcast eyes.
- Think about and address the emotional needs that may be causing a child’s aggressive or withdrawn behaviors.
- Prepare differentiated activities to meet the needs of children who are on target for age/grade-level work as well as those who may have fallen behind during the pandemic.
- Verbally check in on children about their academic and emotional well-being.
- Make time for children to share and discuss their feelings.
- Offer children strategies for self-soothing, such as deep breathing, self-hugs, or the ability to go to a quiet area.

Regard for Student Perspectives

COVID-19 restrictions may limit children’s access to specific roles, materials, or opportunities for independence in the classroom. Even in this environment, make a concerted effort to provide children with flexibility and choice. Having

choices helps children who have experienced trauma feel a sense of control over their environment, which is crucial for their healing.

- When you have to require children to do something, provide choices within the experience. For instance, let them choose a song to sing while hand washing, or where or how to stand while having their temperature checked.
- When you have to interrupt a child's individual pace (to follow a sanitizing schedule, to keep pods together), involve them in deciding if and how they will return to their work later.
- When you have to prohibit an activity (playing tag, working at the sensory table), provide children with reasonable and related alternatives.
- Provide children with classroom jobs that don't require personal contact, such as watering plants or putting away their own nap mats.
- Create Hula-Hoop suspenders or use "airplane arms" for children to define their personal space while encouraging movement.

Behavior Management

Children may have been out of school for months, and while some children may have had a regular schedule, others have not. This fact, coupled with new or changing COVID-19 restrictions, means that all children will be learning new rules and procedures. To keep children and adults safe, frequently provide clear behavior expectations and monitor procedures such as hand washing, physical distancing, and mask wearing. You can support children with positive and proactive behavior management strategies.

- If you cannot use subtle redirections such as moving close to a child or giving them a gentle touch, use other strategies, such as quick verbal redirections, hand signals, or pointing at picture cards.
- Provide feedback that encourages children to continue behaving appropriately. State desired behavior and point out when children are doing well.
- Anticipate when problem behavior could arise (likely distractions, waning attention, not following activity instructions) and plan in advance how you will address it.

Productivity

As children return to the classroom or as COVID-19 restrictions change, children will need to learn new routines and procedures. Help children know what to do throughout the day so that they can take part in keeping everyone safe and the classroom running smoothly. You can support children with frequent and clear instructions and intentional advance planning.

- Post a consistent daily schedule to let children know what to expect.
- If you have managerial tasks related to maintaining separation and sanitation, plan how you will complete them without creating downtime for children. For instance, think of how you can maximize what you do during nap time.
- If singing is discouraged as part of your program's COVID-19 strategy, alter routines that were previously based around songs. For instance, you might play the song on speakers rather than singing it or use a spoken rhyme instead.
- Plan transitions in ways that prevent children from crowding together.
- If maintaining distance makes some transitions take longer, look for ways to use these transitions as learning time.
- Set up for lessons/activities in advance so that all materials are ready and accessible.
- Know the content and logistics of your lesson/activities before conducting them.

Instructional Learning Formats

COVID-19 restrictions may limit your usual strategies for drawing children into lessons and activities, such as sitting with them and directly joining in their play or using exaggerated facial expressions. Additionally, children who are

experiencing high levels of stress may have difficulty concentrating. Think about other ways that you can encourage children's engagement.

- Actively seek information about what children are working on and how it is going.
- Add to what children are already doing by suggesting new ways of using materials or developing their activities.
- Provide children with a personal set of hands-on materials.
- Use digital devices and projection as a method of engaging children.
- Help children use everyday objects in new and creative ways.

Concept Development

The use of masks and social distancing may make it feel more difficult to have instructional discussions with children throughout the day. You can promote children's higher-order thinking skills by asking questions and making connections aloud, even when there is not an immediate opportunity to develop the topic into a discussion, and by taking advantage of moments when you can work with small groups to have deeper conversations. Asking children to think about COVID-19 and its effects can be an important part of helping them make sense of what is going on in the world around them.

- Use instructional strategies that focus on critical thinking, such as sequencing activities, comparing and contrasting, problem solving, and predicting.
- Allow children to create their own products with the materials available.
- Have children create nonphysical products, such as making up a story.
- Link ideas across activities by choosing lessons/activities that have a similar conceptual focus.

Quality of Feedback

The use of masks and social distancing may make it feel more difficult to engage in lengthy back-and-forth exchanges with children. You can promote children's learning and understanding by responding to their comments and actions with hints, assistance, questions, information, and encouragement, even when there is not an immediate opportunity to continue the exchange, and by taking advantage of moments when you can work with small groups to have deeper exchanges. Providing effective feedback can be an important part of instilling confidence in children who have experienced high levels of stress during the pandemic.

- Pay attention to children's level of understanding and build on it by offering hints and assistance.
- Ask follow-up questions to help children reach a deeper understanding of content.
- Provide specific information about why a child's response is correct or incorrect.
- Expand on children's responses/actions to provide additional information or clarification.
- Recognize children for their efforts, encouraging them to persist in their thinking or participation.

Language Modeling

The use of masks and social distancing may make it feel more difficult to engage in genuine conversations with children. You can promote children's language development by encouraging peer conversations within groups and using self- and parallel talk and advanced language to provide language as you move around the classroom, even when there is not an immediate opportunity to engage in a dialogue. You can also take advantage of moments when you can work with small groups to have more authentic conversations. Providing children with language and conversational opportunities related to COVID-19 can help them process and communicate their experience of the pandemic.

- Ask open-ended questions or otherwise invite children to use expressive language.
- Create a balance of child and teacher talk by waiting intentionally for children's responses.
- Acknowledge children's comments and repeat and extend their statements.
- When children's comments are difficult to hear, approximate repetitions by asking, "Did you say ...?"
- When you can't hear what a child said, acknowledge their comment by asking them to repeat themselves.
- Help children understand language by describing an action with words as its happening.